

DIET VS EXERCISE

Protect your brain. Drop a dress size. Get a good night's sleep.
When it comes to specific health goals, which works best?

Target your diet
and exercise
regime to get
the best results



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It's a given that moving more and eating better are both vital, and following recommended guidelines – getting your five a day, cutting out junk food, and doing 30 minutes of aerobic exercise five times a week – is key to a healthy mind and body. But the latest research shows that, in some cases, focusing your attention on one over the other will help you hit your health and fitness targets faster. So... which are you going to do first?

IF YOU WANT TO... SLEEP BETTER

It's all about exercise

You need just one or two bad nights to realise how debilitating a lack of sleep can be. But, according to Dr Gregg Jacobs, who has spent 25 years working with over 10,000 insomnia patients, it's possible to stop sleep-loss spiralling out of control. 'There is good evidence that exercise directly improves sleep. We use energy during exercise and our body recovers with increased pressure for sleep – food doesn't produce the same effect,' he explains. Exercising in the afternoon or early evening raises your body temperature, which then declines rapidly four or five hours later, aiding the natural process of drifting off. New research shows that a 50-minute session of moderate intensity aerobic exercise three times a week can reduce pre-sleep anxiety and improve chronic insomnia. But it is not a cure-all: 'It is only when exercise is combined with changes in sleep habits, such as not using tablets or smartphones for two hours before bed, that it is vastly improved,' Gregg says.

Get your sweat on

'You need to do any cardio exercise that raises body temperature and makes you sweat, and my experience with patients suggests you need to do it at least every other day,' explains Gregg. And remember to make sure it's not within three hours of bedtime, to give your body time to cool down. For more recommendations, Dr Jacobs' Conquering Insomnia programme, based on his research at Harvard Medical School, is available at cbtforinsomnia.com.

IF YOU WANT TO... PREVENT HEART DISEASE

It's all about diet

There's plenty of evidence that diet is the way to go to cut your risk of heart disease, says GH's Dr Sarah Jarvis, as she reels off lists of studies proving the miraculous effects of the Mediterranean diet. Last year, in a trial of more than 7,000 people aged over 55 and at high risk of heart disease, the group following a Mediterranean-style diet reduced their risk by almost 25% compared with those eating a normal diet. But remember: regular exercise still makes a difference to your levels of good HDL cholesterol.

On the menu

Eat fresh fruit and vegetables every day and swap saturated fats like butter for unsaturated fats like olive oil. Try to reduce your overall fat intake to less than 30% of your total calories, with less than a third of those fats saturated. Boost the fibre in your diet and get omega-3 from oily fish. 'I was thrilled to hear yet more evidence for the benefits of the Mediterranean diet,' says Sarah, 'because it's the way we eat in our house! I much prefer a bowl of olive oil and balsamic vinegar to dip my bread in rather than butter, and there's nothing more enticing than a plate of brightly coloured grilled vegetables.' She also recommends the MyHealth test at patient.co.uk, which places you in a queue of 100 people to compare your risk of heart disease with others', then gives you targets and advice on how to reduce your risk.



IF YOU WANT TO... PROTECT YOUR BRAIN

It's all about exercise

Dementia hit the headlines in December when the UK called the first G8 summit on a specific illness since HIV. Prime Minister David Cameron compared the battle against this disease with tackling malaria and cancer, and called for a global fight-back. Dementia will affect 135 million people worldwide in less than

50 years' time. The good news is we can do something that may help prevent its onset. A study by Cardiff University that followed more than 2,000 people for 35 years found that they could reduce the risk of developing dementia by 60% if they followed at least four out of five lifestyle factors: regular exercise, a healthy diet, low body weight, low alcohol intake and not smoking.

Exercise was found to be the biggest contributor, and studies have suggested it can also be beneficial for people who have already developed dementia. Although Jessica Smith of the Alzheimer's Society was keen to stress that, 'While these things may reduce the risk, they won't prevent the condition completely.'

Get your sweat on

'Over the course of someone's life, the amount they exercise will change, but regular physical activity is the most important thing,' says Jessica. So choose something you can keep up: if you haven't exercised for a while, find a group to walk with at ramblers.org.uk, or think about what you used to love doing as a child and go wherever your memories take you – it may be cycling, swimming or dance classes. Aim for half an hour five times a week, and consult your GP before trying anything new.

IF YOU WANT TO... DROP A DRESS SIZE

It's all about diet

Losing weight is about burning more calories than you consume, and most people find it easier not to eat them in the first place rather than to try to exercise them off. The numbers say it all: to drop a pound a week you need to cut 500 calories a day. That's the equivalent of running for an hour – or not eating one Starbucks blueberry muffin. But exercise is still important for changing your figure, says Professor David Haslam, Chair of the National Obesity Forum: 'In isolation it won't make you lose weight, but exercise does improve your body shape – so your dress size will go down, as long as you keep doing it,' he explains.

On the menu

'To reduce dress size rapidly, nothing beats a low-carb diet – but be warned: while drinking cabbage soup for eight weeks will induce weight loss (and wind!), you will regain the weight when you return to your old habits,' says David. For a long-term approach, focus on eating fewer refined carbohydrates such as those in frozen meals, processed foods, bread, pasta and sugar. 'These are empty carbohydrates, which are nutrition free and disturb our metabolism,' David explains. Replace them with wholegrains, vegetables and fruit, and get protein from lean meat, eggs and fish. 'Make small but sustainable changes. If you stop having sugar in your tea, it'll taste horrible for two weeks – but after that, you will have to spit into a nearby plant pot if someone gives you the wrong cup!' he says.

IF YOU WANT TO... GET MORE ENERGY

It's all about diet

Eating smart throughout the day is the key to having a steady supply of energy when you need it, according to GH nutritionist Anita Bean. 'We used to think of sugar and refined carbohydrates as quick energy fixes – which of us hasn't reached for a biscuit when we feel ourselves starting to flag? But we now know that these high-GI foods trigger the release of insulin, which quickly

IF YOU WANT TO... FIGHT DEPRESSION

It's all about exercise

Adults who do some kind of physical activity every day are at least 20% less likely to develop depression, according to the Department of Health, and studies have shown that 50 minutes of moderately intense exercise three times a week improves negative moods and depression. A recent review of 30 randomised controlled studies concluded that exercise reduces depressive symptoms. Other research shows that it is effective on its own and in combination with other treatments, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy or medication. But not all GPs are clued up: research from Nuffield Health reveals that only 1% of people who received treatment for low mood were recommended exercise as a way to relieve symptoms – compared with 46% who were prescribed medication.

Get your sweat on

Beth Murphy, of mental health charity Mind, explains: 'If you go for a run, you may feel less stressed and have a clearer head because exercise is a natural stimulator of important "mood" hormones including serotonin and dopamine. Even small things like walking to the shops can help lift your energy levels.' Mind's research into ecotherapy – exercising in a green environment – shows that the benefits last: seven in 10 people said it boosted their mental health in the long term. And the good news is that new research shows that exercising at your own pace gives better results, when compared with following a prescribed programme. 'Everyone's different – some enjoy yoga, while others prefer rock climbing. At Mind HQ, we encourage staff to take part in Pilates, so if work feels busy, you can take time out to relax and unwind,' says Beth.

transports glucose out of the blood stream, meaning you may be left with lower blood sugar levels than before.'

On the menu

'There's no magic food that will make you feel more energetic, but changing the size, type, and timing of your meals will help you avoid energy dips,' says Anita. Plan regular meals, and make sure each one includes protein and fat along with high-fibre carbs – adding a little grated cheese to pasta or swapping jam for peanut butter will result in a longer-lasting rise in blood sugar and energy. If you want a snack, have a handful of nuts, or add seeds or granola to a pot of plain yoghurt. And avoid carbohydrates such as white bread, pasta, rice and potatoes.

IF YOU WANT TO... BEAT MENOPAUSAL SYMPTOMS

It's all about diet

When you give your body what it needs during the menopause, you're not just looking at switching off the hot flushes and the night sweats – you're protecting yourself against osteoporosis, dementia and heart disease in later life, too, explains Maryon Stewart, author of *The Natural Menopause Plan*. 'For the hot flushes and night sweats, the most important factor is diet. But remember: research has shown that up to 60% of hot flushes can be eliminated by doing 20 minutes of formal relaxation a day, like meditation,' she says.

On the menu

The falling oestrogen levels that trigger hot flushes, weight gain and low mood can be limited by eating foods that contain phytoestrogens. Maryon suggests that for breakfast, you pour 250ml of soya milk over muesli and add two tablespoons of golden linseeds; and then include tofu, edamame beans or a soya yogurt in your lunch or dinner. Dietician Laura Crossley recommends avoiding caffeine (including chocolate), alcohol, spicy food and red wine to reduce hot flushes. Because your metabolism slows during the menopause, cutting 100 calories daily from your diet will help prevent weight gain – but it's important to eat low-fat dairy products such as reduced-fat cheese to help maintain bone strength. □

*CALL THE ALZHEIMER'S SOCIETY'S NATIONAL DEMENTIA HELPLINE ON 0300 222 1122 FOR INFORMATION AND SUPPORT. FEATURE: MOVA SARNIER. PHOTOGRAPHY (POSED BY MODELS): CAMERA PRESS. CONDITIONS AND TREATMENTS VARY FROM PERSON TO PERSON. CONSULT YOUR GP ABOUT ANY SPECIFIC CONCERNS AND BEFORE FOLLOWING MEDICAL ADVICE ON THIS PAGE.